

## Globalization through the Eyes of Business, Labour and the Women's Movement Three Visions for Quebec's Modernity

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**Abstract** *This chapter assesses Quebec at the turn of the millennium by considering how major collective actors in Quebec society define globalization and propose policy strategies for responding to it. It treats globalization not as an academic concept, but as a policy space in which actors engage in an attempt to further their social and economic development strategies. The chapter analyzes the presentations made by employers' associations, union federations and women's groups to the National Assembly's hearings on the Free Trade Area of the Americas and on the creation of an Observatory on Globalization. From the presentations, one can observe that these collective actors make quite contrasting arguments concerning what globalization processes entail, and propose solutions ranging from accepting the status quo, to attempting to control and regulate certain aspects, to exploring alternative forms of development and international solidarity. Overall, the analysis highlights the presence of competing understandings of the problems confronting Quebec, and of alternative roadmaps for where Quebec's modernity should lead.*

While the definition of globalization is a contested topic within the academe, it is also a topic of political contest in society more broadly. How one defines what globalization is, what globalization causes, and what social response is appropriate to deal with globalization, does affect the policy-making process and by extension the distribution of symbolic and material resources (Stone, 1989). We can therefore follow Dufour (2006; 2007) in seeing globalization as a new “political space” which collective actors such as interest groups and social movements seek to occupy in order to further their broader projects. As globalization comes to be defined, however fuzzily, as a factor requiring policy responses, collective actors will attempt to advance understandings of globalization that privilege desired policy responses. Debates on globalization therefore provide a lens for considering Quebec at the turn of the millennium, as collective actors respond to the inherited problems and challenges of modernity by putting forward visions of where Quebec’s modernity should lead, and suggestions for how to achieve them collectively through the use of political power. This chapter will analyze the positions presented by major collective actors (employers’ associations, union federations, and women’s organizations) to the National Assembly’s hearings on the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA/ZLEA) and on the proposed creation of an *Observatoire sur la mondialisation*. It will argue that these debates show evidence of at least three “globalizations”, with each one linked to a broader project of transforming Quebec’s political economy (neoliberalism, social democratic competitiveness, economic and social solidarity) and thus proposing a different modernity for Quebec.

## 1. Globalization as a Policy Field

Globalization has been a focal point of scholarship in the social sciences and humanities for nearly a decade and a half. It has generally been identified as a process or set of processes having material effects. In social scientific scholarship on Quebec, for instance, there have been debates about whether globalization serves to make sovereignty more viable and likely, as the new economic geography redraws the maps of citizenship and belonging (Jenson, 1995) or international trade agreements reduce the cost of secession (Martin, 1997), or whether the social inequalities and fragmentation of identities associated with globalization frustrate sovereignist goals (Salée, 2002).

However, beyond these academic arguments about the repercussions of these processes on social outcomes, political actors themselves have taken up the task of defining what globalization is, and what needs to be done in response. Globalization thus can be seen to be a political *space* which existing political interests are called upon to occupy, and whose contours they in turn attempt to define. This is a recursive process, as participation in this space may cause interests to redefine their identity, rethink their strategies, or craft new alliances. Pascale Dufour has provided a useful way of thinking about the dimensions of this space, which she defines as the privileged mode of belonging to the space, the scale of the space, the structured social relations in the space, and the power relations between the actors and the governments intervening in the space (2006, p. 319).

In this chapter, we study this space more narrowly than does Dufour. Where she is defining a space of action, we are looking more narrowly at globalization as a new field of public policy that social actors are seeking to occupy. In seeking to understand Quebec at the turn of the millennium, public hearings on globalization offer an excellent opportunity to observe how important collective actors depict Quebec's accumulated problems, as well as the preferred actions and projects needed to solve them in the new era of globalization. The hearings on the creation of the Observatoire, held in the summer of 2002, and, to a lesser degree, the hearings on creating the ZLEA, held in the fall of 2000, provided a space for social actors to advance their definitions of the challenges facing Quebec and to show how "globalization" makes the adoption of their vision of Quebec's development all the more urgent. Our method in this chapter is not very sophisticated. We read the presentations made by the major collective actors during the public hearings of the National Assembly's Commission des institutions (CI) and observed how they defined globalization and what public policy solutions they demanded. We then compared the claims to see where they overlapped, and considered them in light of the existing literature about the political implication of business associations, union federations and the women's movement in Quebec.

## 2. Quebec's Three Globalizations

### 2.1. Globalization According to the Business Federations

The business federations argued that globalization had been and still is a positive force for the Quebec's economy and population. They defined globalization around its economic dimensions, and mainly in terms of free trade and market liberalization. According to the Conseil du Patronat (CPQ), « *Le grand défi avant de répartir la richesse, c'est de la créer, et nous pensons qu'une extension de la zone de libre-échange est un élément qui devrait favoriser la création d'une plus grande richesse* » (CI, Sept. 28, 2000, p. 15). This view was shared by the Association des manufacturiers et exportateurs du Québec (AMEQ), who believed that the ZLEA would mean « *l'augmentation de la production, l'augmentation de l'embauche, l'accroissement de la demande des biens et services, l'accroissement des revenus, taxes et impôts pour le gouvernement, bref l'accroissement de la richesse collective québécoise* » (CI, Sept. 28, 2000). For both the AMEQ and the Chambre de commerce du Québec, the market liberalization achieved under NAFTA and the WTO had already increased the GDP and the employment rate, and created wealth that had been widely shared (CI, Sept. 5, 2002). In sum, for the CPQ, globalization is a force of progress, leaving in its wake « *de nouvelles instances de gouvernance mondiale, la répartition de la richesse, l'amélioration du sort des pays en voie de développement et les pratiques qui entourent le commerce et les investissements* » (CI, Sept. 4, 2002).

This view of globalization is a logical extension of the economic liberalism that the major employers' federations have put forward for the past forty years (Graefe, 2004a). Even if these associations saw the growth of the state sector with an eye of suspicion, they were willing to participate in the Observatory provided that it adopt an understanding of globalization similar to their own, particularly in foregrounding issues of trade.

The main place where the employers' federations depart from a largely neoliberal script is in the realm of culture. For both the CPQ and the AMEQ, there is some recognition of the need to preserve Quebec's cultural diversity and uniqueness, although they give no real specification of how this is to be accomplished. The AMEQ also noted that the environment and labour standards should be considered in the process of further trade liberalization, but again, without any real specification. On the ideological fringe, the pro-free enterprise IEDM poses the cultural question as a more general one of liberalization, whereby the flourishing of Quebec culture relies on its ability to create «value» on the market. It is doubtful that the business federations share this extreme view, but the relative weight given to economic considerations as compared to all other questions underlines the extent to which cultural preservation and expression are felt to be largely derivative of dynamic economic performance: a successful economy will support a thriving class of francophone capitalists and professionals with world connections, and thereby reinforce the position of the French language and a series of indigenous cultural institutions.

If there is a surprise in the business presentations, it is the absence of a critique of Quebec statism, and of how Quebec's global competitiveness is hamstrung by high taxes and excessive regulation. This argument has been central to the discourse of the business federations since the early 1980s (Graefe, 2004b), but only crops up in the presentations in the form of allusions to the need to maintain competitive tax rates (e.g. the CPQ in CI, Sept. 26, 2000). The relative absence of these arguments may reflect the larger absence of any discussion of social rights and the welfare state in their presentations. This suggests that these are not central components of the future being projected by the business federations. Indeed, for the latter, the challenge is to embrace global economic trends, and to extract the economic gains that are associated with ongoing participation in economic liberalization.

## 2.2. Globalization According to the Unions

The union federations' perspectives converged on a few basic points, all of which explained the current form of globalization as a manifestation of the neoliberal economic order. Above all, nearly every presentation used a bottom-up approach in dealing with the complexities of globalization. In other words, the basic social consequences of globalization and free trade were at the forefront of their analysis. They argued that the current neoliberal paradigm seeks to marginalize societal interests in favour of simple economics, and thus is oblivious to the inequitable social outcomes that result. Globalization may be economically driven, but our understanding of how it has an impact on Quebec and on other societies cannot be limited to this dimension. The unions also pointed to the multidimensional character of Quebec's insertion into the global. Beyond trade and investment flows, they stressed the historic linkages of the Quebec union movement to international and global ones through international solidarity efforts, participation in international labour bodies, and sectoral alliances with unions in other countries (e.g. see the FTQ's presentation to the Observatory debate, CI, Aug. 29, 2002). For the unions, recent trade negotiations are seen to undermine the influence of the labour movement, weaken the effectiveness of social services, increase inequality and threaten democracy. In their view, the process of globalization

has further strengthened the power of corporate bodies to override governmental legislation in their pursuit of profit, whilst simultaneously degrading the capacity of the state to maintain a functioning system of social goods and cultural preservation. They believe Quebec has failed to develop an adequate plan to engage with these issues, and that the federally based democratic deficit (that is, the non-recognition of Quebec's national status, and the concomitant strengthening of the powers of the National Assembly) furthers this predicament. The 2006 motion of the federal Parliament recognizing that Quebec forms a nation would be unlikely to change the unions' analysis, as this recognition has not provided Quebec with a fuller set of powers to meet the challenge of globalization head on.

The Confédération des syndicats nationaux (CSN) translated this thinking into an argument about rights. The CSN recognized that globalization contains the promise of affirming universal human rights, but argued that the current model of globalization largely promoted investors' "right to profit", as entrenched in trade agreements:

*Mais, dans ces droits et obligations-là, dans un accord de type commercial, on est en droit de se poser: Qu'est-ce qui prévaut dans les droits? Il y a des droits qui sont plus fondamentaux que d'autres? Nous, ce qu'on pense, c'est que les droits humains et fondamentaux doivent avoir préséance sur les droits commerciaux (CI, Sept. 26, 2000, 10h00).*

This claim is consistent with the CSN's general strategy in public policy issues. The emphasis on rights, and especially human rights in the broad sense (*i.e.* including social and cultural rights), is a way of criticizing the neoliberal marketization of the public sphere and of proposing an alternative. In their view, Quebecers should have a right to public goods and services, which means sheltering these goods and services from privatization. During the debates, the CSN did not offer concrete solutions for protecting these acquired rights, but nevertheless demanded their protection and extension. When it came to the democratic deficit that limited Quebec's ability to extend its social rights, namely the federal government's interference, the CSN advocated mobilizing civil society in the hopes that popular democratic pressures might overcome bureaucratic and institutional blockages (CI, Sept. 5, 2002).

The FTQ put forward a similar position. In the ZLEA debate, the FTQ criticized the simplistic fiscal conception of free trade, which fails to address the social costs of liberalizing markets. At the Observatory discussions, they related this injustice to the financialization of the market that squeezes workers and communities dependent on the productive economy. These issues are seen as a result of the current model of globalization, which engenders a destructive approach to labour and marginalizes certain areas of employment. Their suggested solution to this problem is the creation of a regulatory system to manage the international economy. Their policy proposal is analogous to the grievance procedure used by the union within domestic firms. For instance, during the ZLEA debates, the FTQ suggested that Quebec should send a tripartite delegation to future trade negotiations, consisting of government, employers and trade unions. This would ensure a fair balance and increase transparency in the negotiating process, offering a more holistic Quebecois perspective on a national level. There would thus be a place to voice the union federation's vision of changing the direction of globalization, from internationalization based on economic principles to internationalization based on humanity (CI, Aug. 29, 2002).

The radicalism underlying these calls for a wholesale change in globalization nevertheless hides the desire to be an honest broker and to extract concessions that do not really place the current form of globalization into question. This could also be seen in their narrower suggestions about the Observatory that aimed mainly to secure organizational benefits. For instance, the smallest federation, the Centrale des syndicats démocratiques, requested that the Observatory expand the numbers of business and labour representatives so that there would be five union seats, since the CSD is habitually excluded when there are only four (which are then divided between the FTQ (2), CSN (1) and CSQ (1) (CI, Sept. 5, 2002). The FTQ likewise requested that the Observatory not duplicate the work of existing organizations so much as support and draw on them. From the tenor of the presentation, it appeared that this might serve to subsidize some of the FTQ's existing international work (CI, Aug. 29, 2002). But even beyond these self-serving suggestions, the radical language is not connected to radical solutions. We have already noted the lack of concrete solutions in the case of the CSN, and it is hard to see the FTQ's tripartism significantly changing the direction of neoliberalism, at least if we take account of the support of both business associations *and* governments for trade and investment liberalization.

Overall, then, despite some pithy critiques, the union federations are looking to "social-democratize" neoliberalism. They believe Quebec's full development requires greater regulation of capital in order to maintain high-quality employment and to finance high-quality social programmes. Part of this regulation involves ongoing concertation with labour. Elsewhere, Quebec's labour organizations have argued that high pay and advanced social programmes can coexist with economic openness, particularly where business works in partnership with unions to develop positive-sum solutions in the workplace, in community development, in training, and in macro-economic decision-making (see Graefe, 2007). The globalization debates provided the union movement another opportunity to present their argument that neoliberalism and the erosion of social goods were harming Quebec's development, and that Quebec would be better served by taming the more savage aspects of contemporary capitalism so as to allow for some greater redistribution of resources and for the involvement of a broader range of stakeholders in economic decision-making.

### 2.3. Globalization According to the Women's Movement

Within the Observatory debates, the Fédération des femmes du Québec (FFQ), in partnership with the Marche mondiale des femmes, offers one of the most thoroughly critical examinations of globalization. They equate contemporary globalization to other forms of social behaviour, which work to subjugate women in various ways. Oppression, under globalization, operates in part through neoliberal policy strategies that strengthen social inequalities, including those associated with patriarchy, and which thus play a role in subordinating women. The emphasis neoliberal policy places on individualism and competition makes progressive models of equality harder to achieve. For the FFQ, the current form of globalization demonstrates three worrying tendencies: a one-sided emphasis on economic aspects; a blind promotion of competitiveness; and making public decisions solely accountable to the market. Their proposed

solution has four parts: the recognition of human rights; the prioritization of gender equality; the rethinking of work and employment in terms of the new economy; and the reinvention of family roles. More concretely, the FFQ recommends a myriad of policy solutions similar to those of the union groups. Such proposals include the absolution of Third-World debt and the construction of an international democratic body (CI, Sept. 4, 2002).

The FFQ therefore follows the unions in advancing a critical reading of globalization, as well as in proposing solutions to counter the “market fundamentalism” of the current situation. Unlike the unions, the FFQ is not ready to water down its critique in order to develop forms of concertation with the business federations. This is clear in their reflection concerning the management of the Observatory. The FFQ fears that an “anxious neutrality” of not wanting to offend any of the participants will limit the Observatory’s organizational capacity. The real vocation for the Observatory should instead be to define the views of the Quebec people, which the FFQ seems to believe is close to their own.

Of the three positions considered here, the women’s movement is clearly the most radical in that it is the only one that moves firmly away from neoliberalism, and indeed at times from capitalism, in terms of the economic framework most propitious for social and economic development. The globalization hearings provided the women’s movement with a way to develop the global dimension of their alternative thinking about development. It thus extends some of the emphasis on “quality of life” issues raised by women’s organizations on regional development boards (Masson, 2001), as well as the emphasis on labour market re-regulation and the creation of socially useful goods and services (social infrastructures) raised during the 1995 Bread and Roses March against Poverty (David and Marcoux, 1995). While the unions seek to create institutions to squeeze more collective benefits from the current global economy, the Quebec women’s movement argues that the forms of development it wishes to create will require more radical changes, including the way in which the economy and development are conceptualized. This allows them to link their Quebec demands with more global ones, and thus to draw ideas from the networks established as part of the 2000 World March of Women.

## **Conclusion**

The debates on globalization present at least three different understandings of what globalization is and what it requires as a policy response. More broadly, they offer us a window for observing the contrasting readings made by leading collective actors of Quebec at the turn of the new millennium. There are important and significant differences in what social issues are seen to have been accumulated by earlier development models, as well as in what must be done to address these issues. When we analyze Quebec at the turn of the millennium, we must therefore avoid the trap of reification. When Quebec makes choices about how to pursue its modernity, for instance by making policy decisions as a collective response to the challenge of globalization, we can in fact observe numerous political projects seeking to shape this response. Each of these projects in fact opens a different path towards the future. As academics, we

can certainly debate what the effects of globalization are for Quebec, but the manner in which globalization is lived and managed will be shaped, in consensus and in conflict, by Quebecers themselves. In one way, this is simply stating the obvious, but it allows political and sociological analysis to continue to take apart well-rehearsed political (Ministère des Relations internationales, 2006) and academic (Paquin, 2001) discourses that project a future for Quebec that is univocal and conflict-free.

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